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Increasing customer loyalty and customer intimacy by improving the behavior of employees

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Abstract

Purpose – One of the most important characteristics of high-performance organizations is that these organizations always aim at servicing their customers as best as possible. In practice, this means that the employees of these organizations have to behave toward customers in such a way that these customers are not only fully satisfied but also become loyal to the organization. The purpose of this paper is to look at the concrete behaviors that are needed to create this customer loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach – From a literature review the items that potentially are of influence on creating customer loyalty and customer intimacy were identified, based on a previous validated questionnaire while adding additional items. These items were subsequently validated in practice with a questionnaire distributed among people who are in daily life regular customers of organizations.

Findings – The research results show that there are eight behavioral factors of importance to create customer loyalty and customer intimacy: first, service quality delivered by employees; second, capability of employees to deliver high quality; third, empathy of employees toward customers' wishes and needs; fourth, understanding of employees of customers' needs; fifth, responsiveness of employees toward the needs of customers; sixth, courtesy of employees toward customers; seventh, service manner of employees; and finally, trust customers place in employees.

Research limitations/implications – The implication of this research is that, now that the behavioral factors are known, an organization can make sure its employees focus on displaying these behaviors toward customers consistently over time, in order to make sure customers will experience the organization as a high-performance organization and will feel loyalty toward the organization.

Originality/value – The research described in this paper adds to the literature in the sense that it encompasses previous research into once item list and specifically looks at behaviors that create excellent service and thereby customer loyalty and customer intimacy, both concepts that go beyond the much researched topic of customer satisfaction.

Keywords Customer loyalty, Service quality, High-performance organizations, Excellence, Customer intimacy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One of the most important goals of every organization is to serve customers as best as possible (de Waal, 2012). In order to fulfill this goal, employees of the organization need to realize that customers are the most important thing in the world to them, and that without satisfied customers the organization does not have a reason to exist. In practice, this means that employees have to behave in such a way toward customers that these customers are not only fully satisfied with the service provided at a

particular moment, but, in a longer-term perspective, become loyal to the organization. In the past decade, researchers have reported that customer loyalty goes beyond customer satisfaction as the latter points at the result of one or a limited number of encounters between customers and organizations, while the former refers to an ongoing relation between these customers and organizations (Bügel, 2010). Customer loyalty has many advantages for an organization: favorable word-of-mouth marketing, justified price premiums, reduced employee training costs, and lower employee turnover, all resulting in higher firm profits (Yim *et al.*, 2008; Bügel, 2010). A study among 12 USA industries found that organizations that focused on increasing customer loyalty experienced double-digit profits from customers willing to buy more from them, customers being reluctant to switch business away from them, and customers likely to recommend them more often. Concretely, it was found that a modest improvement in customer loyalty could result in between $179 million (for health insurance companies) and $308 million (for hotel chains) of incremental revenue over three years, for every $1 billion in annual sales (Temkin, 2011). As Setó-Pamies (2012, p. 1257) concludes: "Customer loyalty gives companies a competitive advantage that is sustainable over time and is therefore the key to success. Few businesses can survive without establishing a loyal customer base."

Despite numerous studies into the nature of customer loyalty (Al-Awadi, 2002; Chang *et al.*, 2009; Kuo and Ye, 2009; Yieh *et al.*, 2007; Yu *et al.*, 2005), there appears to be no general accepted definition in the literature of the construct of customer loyalty (Setó-Pamies, 2012). Its conceptualization seems to be based on a collection of factors, such as, among others, trust, where the customer trusts the vendor or product; perceived value of the product or service provided, which has to be greater than that supplied by competitors; and emotional attachment, where the customer develops a commitment to the vendor which is resistant to change (Pitta *et al.*, 2006; Reichheld, 1996). Another factor which in recent years is increasingly seen to be of importance in the customer-organization relationship is customer intimacy (Treacy and Wiersma, 1993). Customer intimacy is defined as "making customers feel good whenever they make contact with your company" (Ballou, 2006, p. 5, cited in IBM Global Services, 2006) or, alternatively, "tailoring and shaping products and services to fit the increasingly specific definition of the customer" (Bügel, 2010, p. 65). Previous empirical work has shown that the interaction between the service employee and the customer is the most important determinant of customer intimacy (Fleming *et al.*, 2005; Lloyd and Luk, 2011; Pitta *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Yim *et al.* (2008) found that exceptional service during the customer-employee interaction drives customer-firm intimacy and customer loyalty, and thus profitability (Lau, 2000; Xu and Van der Heijden, 2005).

In the scholarly literature, many models and accompanying scales for measuring the quality of service can be found; for instance the synthesized model of service quality from Brogowicz *et al.* (1990), the information technology (IT) alignment model from Berkley and Gupta (1994), the service quality and satisfaction model developed by Spreng and Mackoy (1996), the PCP (Pivotal, Core, Peripheral) attribute model from Philip and Hazlett (1997), the retail service quality and perceived value model of Sweeney *et al.* (1997), the customer value and customer satisfaction model developed by Oh (1999), the antecedents and mediator model of Dabholkar *et al.* (2000), the internal service quality model by Frost and Kumar (2000), the internal service quality data envelope analysis model from Soteriou and Stavrinides (2000), the service quality model for internet banking proposed by Broderick and Vachirapornpuk (2002), the service quality model for IT-related business developed by Zhu *et al.* (2002), and the

model of e-service quality from Santos (2003). Three of the most widely used models are SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Vijayvargy, 2014), SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1994), and the Grönroos model (Grönroos, 1984, 2000). The SERVQUAL (which stands for service quality) scale measures service quality as the difference between expectations and perceptions of customers while the SERVPERF (which stands for service performance) scale measures the result of the service. In contrast, the scale of Grönroos' Augmented Services Offering model takes into account technical quality, functional quality, and company image, as these are seen as justifications for the service quality a firm provides. In the literature there is a debate about which is the better scale, with the controversies centering around the alleged one-sided focus on the service delivery process while service quality is a more encompassing construct, or whether a certain scale is too American based without taking the European context into account, or whether a scale is too complicated (Jeffrey James, 2004; Vijayvargy, 2014). There is however another contention point which might have been missed thus far in this debate. Many researchers regard service quality levels, which is measured by the above-mentioned scales, as antecedents for customer satisfaction, which, in turn, should correlate with overall attitudinal loyalty of customers (Kumar *et al.*, 2010; Rahman *et al.*, 2012). However, these scales do not measure the actual behaviors which employees need to display in order to create and strengthen customer intimacy and customer loyalty, they provide information about the outcome of these behaviors (Dabholkar *et al.*, 2000). In this respect, there seems to be a gap in the literature as there is – to the best of our knowledge – no validated listing of the behaviors which need to be shown by employees to achieve high service quality, and herewith increased customer intimacy and customer loyalty. To address this gap in the literature, the research question that is central in our study is formulated as follows:

   RQ1. What kind of behaviors does an employee need to display during the customer-employee interaction, in order for the customer to experience customer intimacy which in turn creates customer loyalty?

The main objective of this study was to develop a psychometrically sound instrument for the measurement of employee behavior. Thus, in this study we aim to generate validated measures for the behaviors that employees need to display in order to provide excellent service. More specifically, these behaviors should have predictive value in the light of customer loyalty. In order to do so, first, we will go into a thorough search of the scholarly literature to find out which ingredients are important to take into account in our conceptualization of the behavioral factors needed to create customer loyalty. Next, we will deal with the operationalization of the concept into a set of questionnaire items that are thought to be representative for the construct of customer loyalty and its comprising factors. Finally, the psychometric validation of the instrument will be discussed.

   This paper is structured as follows. First the theory of customer loyalty and behaviors leading to customer loyalty is discussed. Then, the research methodology is described and the research results are given. The paper ends with a conclusion, the limitations of the study, and opportunities for future research. The research described in this paper will add to the literature in the sense that it goes beyond the much researched topic of customer satisfaction, by incorporating the concepts of customer loyalty and customer intimacy which are important in terms of positive outcomes for organizations in the longer run.

Behaviors leading to customer loyalty

Aksoy (2013) succinctly describes the mechanism that leads from employee behaviors to customer loyalty. First, the organization has to understand what constitutes

customer loyalty, that is the organization should clearly define what a loyal customer means so that it can be measured and managed in line with the organization's strategic goals. Then, the organization should actually put practices in place to track customers' loyalty with various performance indicators, such as customer satisfaction and customer complaints and engage customers with the organization in an effort to increase the results on these performance indicators. Lastly, the organization has to act on the outcomes of the performance indicators in order to influence the attitude of customers positively.

The literature provides a plethora of performance indicators with which to measure and track customer intimacy and customer loyalty. Yim *et al.* (2008) looked at the ways a fast food restaurant and a hair salon created customer loyalty and customer intimacy through fostering customer-firm affection, which is defined as the affectionate bond that develops over time between a customer and an organization. The authors found that customer-firm affection complements satisfaction and trust in developing customer loyalty. More specifically, their research showed that customer-firm affection can be greatly enhanced by adding excitement to the service delivered, as this excitement entices customer passion. From their validated measurement scale, the items that deal with the behavior of employees – and the effect of this behavior on customers – during the customer-firm interaction were selected for our study. The items that pertain to the product or to the organization (like organizational policies) were not selected as our study focuses on customer satisfaction, customer intimacy, and customer loyalty, created by the satisfaction of customers with the behaviors employees showed. Our study does not deal with satisfaction created by the features of the organization or its products.

Thus, the validated scale of Yim *et al.* (2008) was taken as the basis for the questionnaire in our research. However, other researchers have found additional factors and items which also seemed of importance to customer intimacy and customer loyalty. We have reviewed these factors and items and added those that were not present in the Yim *et al.* (2008) scale. For instance, Dixon *et al.* (2010) found – in contrast to Yim *et al.* (2008) – that it was not so much about providing a great service experience and delighting the customers, but rather about getting the basics right and reducing the effort for customers to solve their problem that builds customer loyalty. These authors therefore stated that the emphasis of customer service interactions had to be changed toward solving the problem of the customer quickly and easily. Unfortunately, the authors did not come up with possible measurement items but, based on their description of the five tactics high-performance organizations used, we derived items for the four tactics that deal with behavior. The tactics "Don't just resolve the current issue, head off the next one" and "Focus on problem solving, not on speed" were translated into two items ("The employee solved my problem quickly" and "The employee solved my problem completely"), and the tactics "Arm sales representatives to address the emotional side of customer interactions" and "Listen to and learn from disgruntled customers" were operationalized into one item ("The employee was sympathetic to my situation").

Bügel (2010) investigated the development of customer intimacy in five industries and found that it contributed significantly to creating customer commitment to the organization, and eventually to customer loyalty. Bügel's research showed that investing in intimacy particularly paid off during the beginning and the ending of the relationship, and that customer intimacy could help with building customer

relationships, and with preventing these relationships to end. Bügel measured the level of intimacy, passion, and commitment that a customer experiences in general with an organization, however he did not go into specific behaviors of the organizational employee. We therefore decided to build upon the validated general organizational items in regard to intimacy as developed by Bügel (2010) and translated these into general individual behavioral items.

Mechinda and Patterson (2011) examined the effects of the personality of the service provider as well as service climate and job satisfaction on customer-oriented behavior in a hospital setting. They found that various personality traits had differing effects on customer-oriented behaviors of front-line employees, that is nurses. We adjusted the items that the authors used to measure the behavior of the nurses and generalized these (i.e. from "patients" to "customers").

Lloyd and Luk (2011, p. 178) investigated the service behaviors that were supposed to elicit a sense of comfort for the customer during the employee-customer interaction, in which comfort was defined as "an emotion characterized by feeling at ease due to lack of anxiety in a service interaction." The authors found that overall comfort of customers of fashion apparel shops and casual dining restaurants positively impacted both overall quality and customer satisfaction, which ultimately led to positive word-of-mouth. The sense of customer comfort appeared to be created by two key groups of interaction behavior that contained specific behaviors: the effort employees made to understand customers, and their courteous behavior toward customers.

Creating an organizational climate that is aimed at providing excellent service was found to be important to guarantee that customers receive high-quality service (Bowen and Schneider, 1988). The satisfaction of employees with this organizational service climate was referred to as an employee perception of internal customer satisfaction (Xu and Van der Heijden, 2005). Jun and Cai (2010), while researching the dimensions of internal customer satisfaction, found that customer intimacy was the most influential dimension to achieve both high internal customer service quality, and subsequently, satisfaction. As internal customer satisfaction leads to external customer satisfaction, we made the assumption – just as Garvin (1988) did – that the behavior displayed by employees to achieve internal customer intimacy might be the same as the ones needed for achieving external customer intimacy. We therefore incorporated the items found by Jun and Cai (2010) for customer intimacy as well.

Winsted (2000) examined the behaviors of service providers that influenced the customer evaluation of the service encountered during restaurant and medical transactions and, subsequently, tied these behaviors to customer satisfaction. Although, as stated before, we were looking for behaviors that influence customer loyalty and customer intimacy, achieving customer satisfaction was one of the core components of achieving customer loyalty, and therefore we decided to include the behaviors as found by Winsted (2000) as well.

Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) looked into both the behaviors and practices of service providers that built or depleted consumer trust, and into the mechanisms that converted consumer trust into loyalty to the organization. Their framework used a multi-dimensional conceptualization for trustworthiness, and incorporated two distinct facets of consumer trust: front-line employees and management policies. The scholars tested their framework among respondents from retail clothing stores and non-business airline travel agencies. We selected the validated items that Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) developed for the behaviors of front-line employees.

Finally, Dabholkar *et al.* (2000) investigated the factors that predict service quality among the customers of a photographic company that made pictorial membership directories for churches, and found several behaviors from employees that appear to lead to higher service quality. We selected these as well for inclusion in our study.

The resulting item list

As stated before, the scale by Yim *et al.* (2008) formed the basis of the list of measurement items to be used in this research, and it was supplemented with factors and corresponding items from other researchers. The items were grouped by aggregating similar items under one factor with an appropriate description. The items were (re)worded in such a way that each item started with "The employee [...]" so it would be clear in the questionnaire that we were looking for the behavior of employees. Items have been formulated by the first author and cross-validated in an expert meeting consisting of a multidisciplinary group of scholars (covering the fields of behavioral science and marketing) including the second author. For all behavioral factors and corresponding items the literature sources from which the items were derived are given in Table AI. Looking at the items in Table AI, it can be said that we define customer intimacy as Ballou (2006, cited in IBM Global Services, 2006) but with an adaptation: "customer intimacy is the good feeling that is created with customers by the behavior of the organization's employees."

As stated before, in order to test whether the factors had predictive validity, that is whether they showed a significant relationship with customer loyalty, the scale of Yim *et al.* (2008) for loyalty intentions was used as the dependent. We added the scale for commitment of Bügel (2010) to Yim *et al.*'s (2008) scale, as the former comprised some items specifically dealing with the degree of loyalty the customer feels toward an organization. Finally, we added one item of Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) which measured the loyalty of a customer toward an organization. Table AII shows the specific scale items and literature sources. Looking at the items in Table AII, it can be noticed that we basically concur with the definition of Oliver (1999, p. 34) of customer loyalty: "A deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." The items in Table AII show that for customer loyalty not only customers need to have an affective bond to the organization's product/service but also need to act accordingly, that is staying loyal to the organization even when enticed to not do so.

Research methodology

The items for the behavioral factors that are assumed to predict customer intimacy and customer loyalty were collected in one survey. We did not make a distinction between transactional interactions (such as those taking place in a fast food restaurant) and relational interactions (such as the ones in a hair salon) because Yim *et al.* (2008) found in practice no great differences between these two types of interactions. The questionnaire was distributed to the personnel of a client of one of the authors, a large company in the media sector in the Netherlands which catered to both business and individual customers and which preferred to remain anonymous. As such, we used a convenience sample: this organization was interested in the topic of customer intimacy and customer loyalty and therefore made its employees available for participating in our research. This research therefore did not constitute a case study of a particular

company, we were interested in the opinions of employees as customers of other organizations. No selection of participants was made as the possible respondents were asked to participate on the basis of their availability, and because no selection needed to be made as all potential respondents were in daily life on a regular basis customers of other companies. The respondents were asked to reply on the following question: "Please think back to a time when you encountered first-rate service which surpassed your expectations, and rate on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 10 (very important) the importance of the following behaviors during that encounter of the company's service employee for your outstanding experience [...]." In addition, the respondents were asked to indicate how likely it was that they would choose the organization again when requiring new service (see Appendix 2 for the full questionnaire). The survey yielded 117 responses. After removing the questionnaires which were not completed fully, 110 valid responses remained.

In our approach, both the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were optimized by means of using (statistical) validation techniques. More specifically, the multi-dimensional survey consisted of eight dimensions, which can be considered as a set of eight instruments (de Groot, 1961) (see the previous section to understand the basis for the item pools). First, a face validity analysis, that is, a renewed content analysis of the existing dimensions (scales) of the instrument in an expert group of scientists (see also Kidder and Judd, 1986) was performed, followed by a reliability analysis (using Cronbach's α), and factor-analytic techniques. Moreover, a thorough linguistic evaluation of the different items was also taken into account. Different methods of test construction (Oosterveld and Vorst, 1996) were used to further optimize the psychometric qualities of the instrument. Concretely, the validity was thoroughly investigated by studying the correlation structure of all items in the eight measurement scales. In order to support the idea of multi-dimensionality, the items within one scale should correlate substantially with one another. The items from separate dimensions should correlate to a certain extent since they form part of one concept, namely high-performance behavior aimed at increasing customer loyalty. On the other hand, the correlations between items from separate dimensions should not be too high. Badly differentiating items (items that did not discriminate sufficiently) and non-scale fitting items for the distinguished behavioral factors (see Appendices 1 and 2) were therefore eliminated. After the elimination of these items the reliability of the eight scales was investigated. Further homogeneity of the eight separate dimensions was established by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Subsequently, the correlations between the high-performance behavior scales and the customer loyalty items were studied. The latter research step refers to the so-called criterion validity.

Results

We have eliminated cross-loadings that were above 0.40. Thus, six items (16, 17, 26, 27, 60, and 61) were removed as they cross-loaded on more than one factor, herewith violating the requirements for discriminant validity. As a result, of the total original set of 62 items 56 items remained. The structure of the eight dimensions of the employee behaviors are not fully mutually exclusive, however, they appeared to represent correlated aspects. Therefore, after appropriate analyses, the representation (or the factor structure) of the construct as whole, that is employee behaviors, was oblique instead of orthogonal. However, after having eliminated six items that showed rather high cross-loadings, the distinctive power of the different dimensions was satisfying, showing sound discriminant validity. Table I shows the outcomes of the reliability

Behavioral factor	Cronbach α	Behavioral item	Loading
1. Service quality	0.90	1. The employee provided prompt services	0.660
		2. The employee provided accurate services	0.820
		3. The employee provided reliable service	0.784
		4. The employee solved your problem quickly	0.774
		5. The employee solved your problem completely	0.795
		6. The employee provided complete service	0.795
		7. The employee went out of their way to solve your problems	0.694
		8. The employee performed the service right the first time	0.769
		9. The employee's service had much added value for you	0.682
2. Empathy	0.89	10. The employee was very understanding of your situation	0.786
		11. The employee gave you personal attention	0.885
		12. The employee cared about you	0.884
		13. The employee asked you how you were	0.674
		14. The employee treated you carefully	0.756
		15. The employee was warm	0.819
3. Trust	0.91	18. The employee's opinion was honest and reliable	0.661
		19. The employee was a person you could trust	0.863
		20. The employee was a person you had a confidential relationship with	0.638
		21. The employee's behavior instilled confidence in you	0.848
		22. The employee made you feel safe in your transaction with the organization	0.895
		23. The employee was sincere	0.822
		24. The employee made you feel comfortable	0.867
		25. The employee was natural and genuine	0.756
4. Needs understanding	0.92	28. The employee tried to meet your needs	0.884
		29. The employee considered what you had to say	0.839
		30. The employee was interested in your needs	0.883
		31. The employee anticipated your needs	0.893
		32. The employee asked for your preferences	0.736
		33. The employee understood your needs	0.866
		34. The employee treated you as a valued customer	0.666
5. Courtesy	0.92	35. The employee was courteous with you	0.758
		36. The employee respected you	0.717
		37. The employee was helpful	0.843
		38. The employee was attentive	0.817
		39. The employee showed patience with you	0.796
		40. The employee addressed complaints in a friendly manner	0.852
		41. The employee was polite	0.864
		42. The employee was not annoyed with you	0.795
6. Responsiveness	0.88	43. The employee was responsive to your questions and requests	0.859
		44. The employee took the time to give you service	0.795
		45. The employee was readily available when you needed him	0.758
		46. The employee gave you his full attention	0.903
		47. The employee was fully engaged with you	0.828
7. Capability	0.89	48. The employee was intelligent	0.839
		49. The employee was capable	0.861
		50. The employee behaved in a professional manner	0.840

(*continued*)

Table I.
Overview of the
behavioral factors of
influence on creating
customer intimacy,
their reliabilities, and
all item loadings

Behavioral factor	Cronbach α	Behavioral item	Loading
8. Service manner	0.92	51. The employee showed passion for the job	0.709
		52. The employee was knowledgeable	0.836
		53. The employee knew what he/she was doing	0.775
		54. The employee was happy and cheerful	0.816
		55. The employee smiled a lot	0.860
		56. The employee had a sincere facial expression	0.868
		57. The employee was enthusiastic	0.832
		58. The employee talked with you	0.752
		59. The employee did not act arrogantly	0.879
		62. The employee had a good attitude	0.743

Table I.

analyses, using Cronbach's α, and all separate item loadings. The results showed good reliabilities for each behavioral factor and item loadings appeared to be all $\geqslant 0.4$, herewith supporting both convergent and divergent item validity.

The association between the eight behavioral factors in Table I and the customer loyalty items in Table AII was investigated in order to determine which factors were significantly related with customer loyalty. The results, given in Table II, showed that for all behavioral factors the relationship with customer loyalty was significant. This implied that employees that displayed behavior that was in line with the eight behavioral factors were likely to create a positive customer experience, and thereby positively contributed to increasing customer loyalty and strengthening customer intimacy. Overall, these correlations provide preliminary evidence for the predictive validity of the behavioral factors in the light of customer loyalty, given its positive association with all outcome measures. An exception lies in the association with the outcome to consider switching to another company. Obviously, in line with our expectation, this relationship is negative. Future research, using longitudinal designs, is needed to address issues of causality. Given the exploratory character of our contribution, and as the development of a new measurement instrument was the focus of our attention, we have decided to base ourselves upon a thorough analyses of correlational patterns only.

When looking at the strengths of the correlations, it is possible to make a ranking of the behavioral factors, from highest to lowest impact on customer loyalty: service

Behavioral factor	First choice	Preference	Visits	Loyalty	Commitment	Switch	Recommendation
1. Service quality	0.67**	0.69**	0.65**	0.56**	0.49**	−0.34**	0.64**
2. Empathy	0.48**	0.44**	0.40**	0.39**	0.32**	−0.17**	0.45**
3. Trust	0.66**	0.65**	0.61**	0.54**	0.41**	−0.25**	0.61**
4. Needs understanding	0.63**	0.65**	0.60**	0.57**	0.40**	−0.30**	0.57**
5. Courtesy	0.61**	0.60**	0.54**	0.53**	0.38**	−0.29**	0.54**
6. Responsiveness	0.61**	0.61**	0.58**	0.55**	0.35**	−0.35**	0.56**
7. Capability	0.65**	0.63**	0.59**	0.62**	0.45**	−0.32**	0.56**
8. Service manner	0.58**	0.54**	0.49**	0.40**	0.38**	−0.16**	0.56**

Note: **Significant at the 0.01 confidence level

Table II.
The correlations between the behavioral factors and customer loyalty

quality; capability; empathy; needs understanding; responsiveness; courtesy; service manner; and trust. This order means that the employee first and foremost has to provide high-quality service, where high-quality service is defined as prompt, quick, accurate, reliable, and complete service, and that is performed right the first time with great added value for the customer. For this to happen, the organization has to make sure it has high quality, that is capable employees: intelligent, knowledgeable, professional people, with passion for their job. It is also important that customers feel that they are understood by employees who should be understanding, caring, interested, and warm personalities that want to give the customer personal and careful attention. The capabilities and personalities of employees should then show that they are interested in, listen to, think about, and are understanding about what the customers ask, and that they try to meet and even anticipate on their demands, so that the receiving party feels like a valued and trusted customer who is treated with courtesy.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This study yielded the behaviors needed from employees to provide service that surpasses customer's expectations. Now that the most important behaviors are known, an organization has to make sure that its employees are focusing on displaying these behaviors consistently over time, in order to make sure customers will experience the organization as a high-performance organization. It is therefore paramount that these high-impact encounters between employees and customers are not mere incidents, the organization needs to achieve a situation where all employees are able to create these encounters across time. In other words, employees are expected to display high-performance behavior which results in a constant stream of high-impact encounters, and therefore highly satisfied customers. This is important because, as Fleming *et al.* (2005) found, customer satisfaction scores are just averages which might hide the fact that some customers are extremely satisfied while other are dissatisfied, yielding an average of a rather mean customer satisfaction. As Fleming *et al.* (2005, pp. 110-111) described it quite vividly: "We have all seen the claims: A major airline touts itself as an industry leader in on-time performance and has the flight departure and arrival data to prove it. A cellular provider claims to be a leader in customer satisfaction, citing an independent study of customers. A retailer announces that it has won an award for being one of the country's best places to work for the fifth year in a row. Each of these summary claims – based on the results of surveys – may be legitimate, but quick reviews of the on-time performance of specific flights, or candid conversations with cellular customers, or visits to several stores in the retail chain, inevitably reveal a considerable range of performance hidden behind the averages. Some flights are never on time; some always are. Some customers experience nothing but problems; others are routinely delighted. And some stores are exceptional places to work, while others are awful. High-level averages of company performance may provide good marketing copy, and they may make executives feel better about their position in the marketplace. But because they obscure the considerable variation from location to location within a company, they don't give managers and executives the information they need to improve performance." An organization therefore has to make sure that the employee behavior that creates and supports customer intimacy is ingrained in every person that has contact with a customer. Therefore, an important practical implication of our study is that, now that the behavioral factors are known, an organization can make sure that its employees are focusing on displaying positive

behaviors toward customers consistently over time. Herewith, the latter party will experience the organization as a high-performance organization and will be inclined to developed long-term relationships with it. At the same time, organizations will be enabled to add more value in their encounters with customers, raising the overall satisfaction level with these organizations.

There are several limitations to our study. First, all respondents came from one organization only. Despite the fact that we stressed to these respondents that the questionnaire had to be filled in based on their experience with another company, it cannot be ruled out that the experiences they had with customers while in function at their own company might have influenced their scoring. Second, this one organization was based in the Netherlands so the results cannot be generalized to other companies in the Netherlands or to companies in other countries without further study. The latter will give the opportunity to compare the importance of the distinguished behavioral factors in different cultures. Future research is also needed to cross-validate our outcomes across occupational settings and industry sectors. Third, we had a relatively small sample size which means that the promising psychometric qualities of the new measurement instrument we have developed need to be cross-validated in future research. In a follow-up study, data from more respondents across different professional fields and from different countries across the globe could be collected in order to perform a CFA using structural equation modelling (SEM). The next step could be to use a moderated SEM model in order to further test the predictive validity of a model wherein the employee behaviors are used as possible predictors for customer loyalty, and to investigate whether this relationship might be moderated by some important factors as well. This might enable us to search for profession- and/or country-specific recommendations for increasing customer loyalty. Fourth, although we have used items which have been validated in previous research, more research is needed to more safely conclude whether we included all items of importance for creating customer intimacy and customer loyalty. Fifth, all data were collected at a single point in time: that is to say, our study was cross-sectional. This implies that further research is needed in order to address the issue of causality and to better understand how these behaviors contribute to the enhancement of customer loyalty. Research using multi-wave designs can provide more specific information about long-term development of customer loyalty (see also Schalk *et al.*, 2011), including detailed information about stability and changes in the variables, and about cross-lagged relationships (de Lange *et al.*, 2003; Taris and Kompier, 2003). Despite these limitations, it can be stated that this research has been successful in identifying behavioral factors that influence the loyalty of customers to an organization positively. Thus, organizations can now aim at improving and strengthening specifically these behavioral factors in their employees, in order to make sure that the organization's customers are serviced as best as possible, herewith enticing them to return to the organization time after time.

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Further reading

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

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Appendix 1

Behavioral factor	Behavioral item	Sources
1. Service quality	1. The employee provided prompt services	Yim *et al.* (2008), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	2. The employee provided accurate services	Yim *et al.* (2008)
	3. The employee provided reliable service	Yim *et al.* (2008)
	4. The employee solved your problem quickly	Dixon *et al.* (2010)
	5. The employee solved your problem completely	Dixon *et al.* (2010), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	6. The employee provided complete service	Winsted (2000)
	7. The employee went out of his/her way to solve your problems	Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	8. The employee performed the service right the first time	Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	9. The employee's service had much added value for you	Bügel (2010)
2. Empathy	10. The employee was very understanding of your situation	Bügel (2010), Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000), Dixon *et al.* (2010)
	11. The employee gave you personal attention	Jun and Cai (2010), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000), Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	12. The employee cared about you	Winsted (2000)
	13. The employee asked you how you were	Winsted (2000)
	14. The employee treated you carefully	Winsted (2000)
	15. The employee was warm	Winsted (2000)
	16. The employee was willing to bend company policies to help address your needs	Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	17. The employee did not pressure you into buying	Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
3. Trust	18. The employee's opinion was honest and reliable	Yim *et al.* (2008), Winsted (2000), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	19. The employee was a person you could trust	Yim *et al.* (2008)
	20. The employee was a person you had a confidential relationship with	Bügel (2010)
	21. The employee's behavior instilled confidence in you	Jun and Cai (2010), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	22. The employee made you feel safe in your transaction with the organization	Jun and Cai (2010)
	23. The employee was sincere	Winsted (2000)
	24. The employee made you feel comfortable	Winsted (2000)
	25. The employee was natural and genuine	Winsted (2000)
	26. The employee promised to do something by a certain time and then did it at that time	Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	27. The employee promised to do something in a certain way and then did it in that way	Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
4. Needs understanding	28. The employee tried to meet your needs	Yim *et al.* (2008)
	29. The employee considered what you had to say	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	30. The employee was interested in your needs	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	31. The employee anticipated your needs	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000)
	32. The employee asked for your preferences	Lloyd and Luk (2011)

Table AI.
Overview of
behavioral factors

(*continued*)

Behavioral factor	Behavioral item	Sources
	33. The employee understood your needs	Lloyd and Luk (2011)
	34. The employee treated you as a valued customer	Jun and Cai (2010), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
5. Courtesy	35. The employee was courteous with you	Yim *et al.* (2008), Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Jun and Cai (2010), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	36. The employee respected you	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
	37. The employee was helpful	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	38. The employee was attentive	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	39. The employee showed patience with you	Lloyd and Luk (2011)
	40. The employee addressed complaints in a friendly manner	Jun and Cai (2010)
	41. The employee was polite	Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000)
	42. The employee was not annoyed with you	Winsted (2000)
6. Responsiveness	43. The employee was responsive to your questions and requests	Yim *et al.* (2008)
	44. The employee took the time to give you service	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	45. The employee was readily available when you needed him	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	46. The employee gave you his/her full attention	Winsted (2000)
	47. The employee was fully engaged with you	Winsted (2000)
7. Capability	48. The employee was intelligent	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	49. The employee was capable	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	50. The employee behaved in a professional manner	Mechinda and Patterson (2011)
	51. The employee showed passion for the job	Lloyd and Luk (2011)
	52. The employee was knowledgeable	Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000), Dabholkar *et al.* (2000)
	53. The employee knew what he/she was doing	Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
8. Service manner	54. The employee was happy and cheerful	Mechinda and Patterson (2011)
	55. The employee smiled a lot	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000)
	56. The employee had a sincere facial expression	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	57. The employee was enthusiastic	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	58. The employee talked with you	Mechinda and Patterson (2011), Winsted (2000)
	59. The employee was relaxing to interact with	Lloyd and Luk (2011)
	60. The employee was cheerful	Lloyd and Luk (2011), Winsted (2000)
	61. The employee did not act arrogantly	Winsted (2000)
	62. The employee had a good attitude	Winsted (2000)

Note: This table gives an overview of the behavioral factors and items potentially of influence on creating customer intimacy and customer loyalty

Table AI.

Appendix 2

Customer loyalty item	Sources
You consider this company your first choice when choosing the service (first choice)	Yim *et al.* (2008)
This is a company you prefer over others (preference)	Yim *et al.* (2008)
You would continue to visit this company even if it increases prices. (visits)	Yim *et al.* (2008)
To what extend do you intend to remain a customer with this company? (loyalty)	Bügel (2010)
To what extent do you feel committed to the company, even if you had less than positive experiences with it? (commitment)	Bügel (2010)
How often do you consider switching to another company? (switch)	Bügel (2010)
How likely are you to recommend this company to friends, neighbors and relatives? (recommendation)	Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002)
Note: This table gives an overview of items which measure customer loyalty	

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Table AII.
Customer
loyalty items

Appendix 3. The excellent services questionnaire
This research looks at the ways companies can provide excellent service to their customers. For this, we would like to ask you about your experiences with a company which provided you with outstanding service. Please think back to a time when you encountered first-rate service which surpassed your expectations, and rate on a scale of 1 (not important at all) to 10 (very important) the importance of the following behaviors of the company's staff for your outstanding experience:

(1) The staff provided you with prompt service.

(2) The staff provided you with accurate service.

(3) The staff provided you with reliable service.

(4) The staff solved your problem quickly.

(5) The staff solved your problem completely.

(6) The staff provided you with complete service.

(7) The staff went out of their way to solve your problems.

(8) The staff performed the service right the first time.

(9) The staff's service had much added value for you.

(10) The staff was very understanding of your situation.

(11) The staff gave you personal attention.

(12) The staff cared about you.

(13) The staff asked you how you were.

(14) The staff treated you carefully.

(15) The staff was warm toward you.

(16) The staff were willing to bend company policies to help address your needs.

(17) The staff did not pressure you into buying.

(18) The staff's opinion was honest and reliable.

(19) The staff was a person you could trust.

(20) The staff was a person you had a confidential relationship with.

(21) The staff's behavior instilled confidence in you.

(22) The staff made you feel safe in your transaction with the organization.

(23) The staff was sincere toward you.

(24) The staff made you feel comfortable.

(25) The staff was natural and genuine.

(26) The staff promised to do something by a certain time and then did it at that time.

(27) The staff promised to do something in a certain way and then did it in that way.

(28) The staff tried to meet your needs.

(29) The staff considered what you had to say.

(30) The staff was interested in your needs.

(31) The staff anticipated your needs.

(32) The staff asked for your preferences.

(33) The staff understood your needs.

(34) The staff treated you as a valued customer.

(35) The staff was courteous with you.

(36) The staff respected you.

(37) The staff was helpful toward you.

(38) The staff was attentive toward you.

(39) The staff showed patience with you.

(40) The staff addressed your complaints in a friendly manner.

(41) The staff was polite toward you.

(42) The staff was not annoyed with you.

(43) The staff was responsive to your questions and requests.

(44) The staff took the time to give you service.

(45) The staff was readily available when you needed him.

(46) The staff gave you his full attention.

(47) The staff was fully engaged with you.

(48) The staff was intelligent.

(49) The staff was capable.

(50) The staff behaved in a professional manner.

(51) The staff showed passion for their job.

(52) The staff was knowledgeable.

(53) The staff knew what they were doing.

(54) The staff was happy and cheerful.

(55) The staff smiled a lot.

(56) The staff had a sincere facial expression.

(57) The staff was enthusiastic.

(58) The staff talked with you.

(59) The staff was relaxing to interact with.

(60) The staff was cheerful.

(61) The staff did not act arrogantly.

(62) The staff had a good attitude.

Based on your experience with the company, how likely are you (1 = not at all; 10 = most definitive) to:

(63) Consider this company your first choice when choosing the service?

(64) Prefer this company over others when doing future business?

(65) Visit this company even if it increases prices?

(66) To remain customer with this company?

(67) To consider switching to another company?

(68) To stay committed to the company, even if you will have less than positive experiences with it in future?

(69) To recommend this company to friends, neighbors and relatives?

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